

n6 PRINCE BILLOW AND HIS
MEMOIRS

between 1897 and 1903 was his handling of Anglo-German relations : and although no irreparable breach occurred, the opening of a new century saw the Governments and peoples drifting steadily away from one another. Here, indeed, was the acid test of his statesmanship. Billow's direct knowledge of England was confined to brief visits, and he never fully understood her character and outlook. Since France was notoriously irreconcilable and Russia was the rival of Austria in the Near East, it was vital for Germany to keep in with England, all the more because the loss of British friendship was bound to loosen the slender ties which bound Italy to the Central Powers. Two unfortunate decisions were made which were in a large measure to govern the coming years. The first was the creation of a large fleet, which, though its real sponsor was William II, was welcomed by Billow and is stoutly defended in retrospect. Repeating the arguments adduced in *Imperial Germany*, he maintains that a Great Power with strongly armed neighbours, oversea possessions, and a world-wide trade, required a navy big enough for defence against any attack, though, of course, a " danger-zone " period, while the ships were building, demanded a particularly skilful hand at the helm if a conflict with England was to be avoided. The policy, he believes, was wise and inevitable, and he is confident that only the substitution of Bethmann for himself deprived Germany of the peace with honour which the *Flottenpolitik* was intended to guarantee.

The second important decision in the field of Anglo-German relations in these years was the chilly response to Joseph Chamberlain's suggestions of an alliance. For his attitude in this critical matter Billow has been sharply attacked by one after another of his countrymen,

Johamies Haller,
Eckardstein, Eugen Fischer, Willy Becker, who
argued that he
threw away a priceless opportunity which never
recurred. His
rejoinder constitutes the most valuable
contribution to the
history of European diplomacy which these
pages contain.
Every one should now be aware that no offer of
an alliance
was ever made from Downing Street by the
Prime Minister
or the Foreign Secretary, and a good deal of the
wind has thus
been taken out of Eckardstein's sails. But the
fact remains
that there were influential men in Salisbury's
Cabinet who, in
view of the threatening attitude of France and
Russia, desired
a close working association with Berlin. The*
Prince's argu-
ment is that an alliance with England involved
the danger of a